

The 2019 European Elections have led to a reshaping of the political composition of the European Parliament. The two ‘incumbent’ groups (EPP and S&D) managed to keep the relative majority, even though they lost a number of seats in favour of the Greens, the liberals of ALDE and the right-wing populist/nationalist groups. **This mixed result has further put into question the *Spitzenkandidaten* system**, the mechanism introduced in the 2014 election by which the candidate whose party received the highest share of votes would automatically become the President *in pectore* of the next European Commission.

Nevertheless, during the whole campaign, the *Spitzenkandidaten* have paid little attention to their potential delegitimization, and acted as effective candidates for the ‘EU top job’: they flew across the continent looking for support, they communicated policy plans on behalf of their transnational group in the EP and, last but not least, **they participated in three public debates** where they had the chance to confront each other in front of the camera—and the voters.

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Debates of this kind—broadcast all across the Union, mainly through internet streaming—offer a good chance to analyse the public debate on political topics on social networks like Twitter. They tend to catalyse the attention on political topics in short, well-defined windows of time and with a broad usage of frequent words and hashtags. We have taken advantage of this chance to scan the public opinion on Twitter. Moreover, insofar as candidates actively use Twitter to broadcast content during the campaign, we have an opportunity to **tap directly into the way political elites choose to run their campaign and compare it with the way in which campaign topics and messages are picked up by the public.**

To do so, we collected data from Twitter in two ways:

- we followed three Spitzenkandidaten debates—the **Maastricht Debate** (April 29th), the **Florence State of the Union** (May 3rd) and the **Eurovision Debate** (May 15th)—and collected tweets containing the ‘official’ hashtag of each debate or the hashtag #Spitzenkandidaten;
- we collected all tweets posted by the Spitzenkandidaten and by the official EU institutions accounts, as well as all the replies to and retweets of these tweets by other accounts—namely, citizens.

Overall, **we collected and analysed over 40,000 tweets in the period between 20/4-20/5 from the official hashtags** alone, and more than 90,000 tweets, retweets and replies from the official accounts.

The debates

Let’s start with some general consideration of the debates themselves: the debate put in place by the EBU in Brussels has been the most followed and commented on Twitter, thanks especially to the dedicated hashtag #TellEurope, as we will show.

Surprisingly, hashtags related to the Florence debate (#SOU2019, #festivaldeuropa, #FlorenceDebate) have generated only around 2,700 tweets. **Despite the presence of the Spitzenkandidaten of the four major parties (Ska Keller [Greens/EFA], Frans Timmermans [PES], Guy Verhofstadt [ALDE], and Manfred Weber [EPP]) the Florence debate (held at 18-19.30 CET) has received the least comment among the three debates.** The Maastricht Debate, though it was held first (April 29th), and despite the absence of the Spitzenkandidat of the main group (Manfred Weber for the EPP), gathered almost double the number of reactions, with 4,768 tweets labelled with the #MaastrichtDebate hashtag. This can also be related to the presence on stage of the candidates for the ACRE and the GUE/NGL families (Jan Zahradil and Violeta Tomič respectively), who had missed the Florence debate. **Finally, the Eurovision debate blew up the competitors with 15,909 individual tweets under the two official hashtags #EuroVisionDebate and #TellEurope.**

So far, we have discussed the official hashtags. But Twitter messages can be labelled with more than one hashtag, thus signalling the users’ intention to add specific topics to an ongoing conversation, or to signal their preference for candidates, policies or parties.

On this latter point, the Greens’ hashtags emerged as the most quoted: #GreenWave or

#VoteForClimate were both at the top of the list, followed by the official hashtag of the S&D (#ItsTime), #TeamEurope for ALDE, and the EPP hashtag (#ThePowerOfWE).

When it comes to actual topics, the environment dominates the hashtag agenda, with #ClimateChange as most mentioned and other references to green policies.

Behind it stand two other major issues, #Brexit and #Migration, followed by the somewhat surprising #ErasmusAlumni, mainly due to a substantial Erasmus delegation attending the Festival of Europe in Florence, where the SOTEU 2019 has been held.

The Parliament which will be appointed by this election will be the most 'untraditional' ever seen—and this disruption has affected the political landscape even before it has actually happened.

Hashtags also suggest that another aspect of tweets can provide precious insight: the language used in commenting on the debates. **The first non-international hashtag, in fact, is #europawahl2019, the official German hashtag of the elections** (literally, #EuropeanElections2019), signalling that German citizens have been among the most interested in the campaign on Twitter.

Further analysis confirms the thesis: we observe a bubble of conversations taking place in German. **This could be a reflection of the central role of Germany in the EU building process, but it could also be related to the composition of the debate: two Spitzenkandidaten and a moderator are actually from Germany**, and at least two other candidates (Zahradil and Timmermans) are fluent in the language. This German bubble is all the more significant if we consider that Twitter has always struggled to penetrate the German market, especially because [it failed to take root among politicians](#) until recently.

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minor parties have better incentives to exploit social media to build a consensus outside of traditional channels.

A second point worth noticing is that seven out of ten tweets are written in English. This large gap between languages cannot be explained only on the basis of the broader diffusion of Twitter in the UK in comparison to other countries: it is a clear hint that—despite Brexit—**English remains the language of European politics** and, more generally, [of a promising Europeanised public sphere](#).

What have the Spitzenkandidaten tweeted during the campaign?

If we shift our focus to the tweets produced (or retweeted) directly by the official accounts of the Spitzenkandidaten, the hashtags look less relevant: not surprisingly, the most recurrent are the ones referring either to the elections themselves or to the party's official campaigns. Hashtags labelling a topic are much less diffuse. **Skimming the list, the more frequently used hashtags appear to be #Brexit, #EuTransport** (used only by Violeta Bulc, one of the ALDE candidates, who is Commissioner for Transport), #HoldYourBreath (the hashtag supporting the Sea Watch vessel rescue in the Mediterranean, all coming from Die Partei candidate Nico Semsrott) and #SriLanka (related to the massacre in the country on Easter Sunday).

A similarly patchy framework emerges if we move to the analysis of the most recurrent words (duly selected): a strong focus remains on the electoral run itself, and on empathic messages. **Actual topics remain in the background or are otherwise used as support in a type of communication-based on feelings and 'powerful' words**. Nevertheless, most of the attention goes toward social issues—surprisingly enough, considering the extremely limited mandate of the EU in the area—and climate: the economy remains at the bottom of the candidates' 'Twitter agenda'.

And who was more successful?

While there are no major differences between candidates in terms of how much they tweeted, the situation changes dramatically when the echo of their words is measured by the

number of retweets. The leaders of the largest parties are completely overthrown by the Spitzenkandidaten of smaller parties, who got centre stage. **It can be argued that Twitter popularity hardly translates into poll results, but the flip side of the coin could be that minor parties have better incentives to exploit social media to build a consensus outside of traditional channels.** The group performing best on this front is the ALDE, helped both by the 'Team Europe' approach (presenting a ticket of candidates from which the actual President of the Commission will eventually be selected) and by the virtual 'retinue' of its leader, Guy Verhofstadt, who largely outperforms all the other candidates.

#TellEurope, the Spitzenkandidaten and the Citizens

One of the most interesting moments of the campaign, at least from a Twitter perspective, has been the launch of the hashtag '#TellEurope', through which citizens had the chance to submit questions directly to the candidates during the Eurovision Debate held by the European Broadcasting Union on May 15th.

This Twitter sub-debate has been dominated (in terms of magnitude) by Green topics, probably boosted by the fact that the moderators asked questions about these issues as well. Not only are the hashtags from the Green Party/environmental topics first on the list and @skakeller (Green Spitzenkandidat) the most mentioned account, but 'climate' is the most used word in the tweets (444 times), followed by "planet" in sixth place (325 times). **Other relevant topics emerging from this wordbag analysis—a raw but effective approach—are the rights of EU citizens, taxation and trade, Social Europe, energy, the detention of Oriol Junqueras (EFA Spitzenkandidat), the youth, and more generally the future of the EU, which will be determined by the proposals and priorities of the candidates.** The same can be said about the hashtags, where #youcantbewhatyoucantseealsoappears—a motto used both to promote the visibility of minorities and representation of women beyond stereotypes, especially regarding professional careers.

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This set of messages is particularly interesting, as it represents a spontaneous manifestation of interest by citizens, and it might help reconstruct their priorities and preferences when it comes to European matters.

For this reason, **we compared the messages that citizens produced under the hashtag #TellEurope with two other sets of tweets**. On the one hand, we investigated the extent to which citizens' messages resonated with tweets produced by the candidates. Secondly, we checked whether differences could be spotted between citizens who used the hashtag #TellEurope, and those who replied to the candidates' communication.

Unsurprisingly, in such a short time span the messages of the candidates are very dispersed in terms of topics they touch: few hashtags (such as #Migration, #Brexit, and #Innovation) appear in more than one tweet, and among those, the most recurrent are related to policies. Still, terms such as 'climate' (the most frequent topic), 'young', 'wage', 'change', 'social', 'tax' and 'trade' appear in the tweets of several candidates.

Where the debate gets complex is below the Spitzenkandidaten tweets, namely in the 27,660 citizens responses (7,826 replies, 4,399 retweets and 15,435 mentions).

The battle of the echo in these two days is won by Guy Verhofstadt, of the ALDE group, confirming the domain of the Liberal powerhouse on Twitter. Surprisingly, the most mentioned accounts include the Liberal Democrats (UK's ALDE affiliate, one of the most vocal Brexit opponents, and the second largest party in the EP) and *Radio Radicale*, a radio tied to Italian ALDE affiliate *+Europa*, recently affected by a disputed plan of cuts in public funding.

First of all, only a small percentage (700 out of over 27,000) of tweets were labelled with the #TellEurope hashtag, making the two pools almost independent, and the differences between the two all the more interesting.

Users reacted especially well when they had the chance to ask actual questions to candidates directly, throwing several topics into the discussion

Unlike when using the hashtag #TellEurope, in fact, **citizens who took to Twitter to engage in conversations directly with the candidates have manifested interest not only in broad issues but also in specific events, such as the 130th birthday of the Eiffel Tower:** the European Commission commemorated the event's anniversary and the citizens strongly appreciated this gesture, making it the most quoted hashtag. Similarly, another event that stands out was the Christchurch Call to Action Summit, the initiative launched by New Zealand's prime minister to combat the use of the internet to promote violence, held in Paris on May 15th. **With regard to more general topics, the list of quoted issues does not differ that much from the one generated by the #TellEurope hashtag:** the citizens debated about Brexit, the single market, climate change, migration, trade, innovation, foreign affairs and... Alexa, Amazon's virtual assistant. This last topic was due to a joke by Frans Timmermans, who was prompted on corporate tax evasion and provocatively answered 'We should keep asking Alexa, Amazon's virtual assistant: Amazon, when are you going to start paying taxes?' during the debate.

In terms of most employed words, an unexpected attention to money and salaries catches the eye—but it is mainly due to a single, critical tweet toward Nigel Farage by Guy Verhofstadt, which has been widely retweeted. For the rest, the main topic that emerges from the conversation is Brexit, which still is a significant concern for the majority of Europeans.

Conclusions

The Greens and the ALDE have managed to somehow dominate the Twitter debate during the three debates: the former have succeeded in imposing their own agenda on all the parties, helped both by the directness of the message and by the attention recently dedicated to the environment by public opinion. The latter have enjoyed broad visibility—and not by chance have these two parties gained seats. Apart from the environment, Brexit remains the hottest topic in the EU debate, as it has been for the last three years.

The Spitzenkandidaten appeared to be more concerned in gaining the citizens' trust than in focusing on specific issues—something the electorate looked more interested in doing. Users reacted especially well when they had the chance to ask actual questions to candidates directly, throwing several topics into the discussion.

There is an elephant in the room though—or, rather, the elephant is outside the room. The Parliament which will be appointed by this election will be the most

‘untraditional’ ever seen—and this disruption has affected the political landscape even before it has actually happened. One of the groups in the making, in fact, did not select a Spitzenkandidat, thus slipping out of the analysis. This group is expected to comprise **the French and Italian election winners: the Rassemblement National and the Lega-Salvini Premier**, which did not take part in any debate. Despite the relatively poor performances of their allies in other countries, these two parties alone are Twitter powerhouses, and analysis of Twitter debates which included these actors could have told a very different story.

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